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ABSTRACT

The Scottish "exam results crisis" of August 2000 appeared to reveal widespread dissatisfaction with the Higher Still reforms introduced the previous year. For a time the future of the reform seemed to hang in the balance. Yet Higher Still was the product of the consensus which emerged from the "Howie debates" of the early 1990s. It involved a massive consultation exercise with the educational community, and more recent surveys reveal continued support for its broad aims. So how to account for the feelings of resentment and frustration released by the examination results crisis? Many critics blamed the arrogant and unresponsive style of the leadership of the reform. However, a full explanation must take into account the nature of the reform as a flexible unified system, of horizontal as well as vertical lines of conflict within education, and of the political weakness which prevented the leadership from articulating a clear vision. Most countries' post-compulsory education systems are moving toward greater flexibility and unification. The crisis of educational governance in Scotland in 2000 may foreshadow similar crises elsewhere. (Includes an information box.) (BT)

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CES Briefing

What Happened to the Consensus on Higher Still?

by David Raffe, Cathy Howieson and Teresa Tinklin No. 21, June 2001

The Scottish 'exam results crisis' of August 2000 appeared to reveal widespread dissatisfaction with the Higher Still reforms introduced the previous year. For a time the future of the reform seemed to hang in the balance. Yet Higher Still was the product of the consensus which emerged from the 'Howie debates' of the early 1990s, it involved a massive consultation exercise with the educational community, and more recent surveys reveal continued support for its broad aims. So how can we account for the feelings of resentment and frustration released by the exam results crisis?

- **Higher Still** aims to introduce a flexible, unified system of post-16 education. It applies common design principles across different curricula, levels, institutions and age groups.
- **Compared** with other types of reform, the introduction of a flexible unified system requires a policy process which is relatively centralised, 'top-down' and linear and involves conflict between different educational interests. Many participants are disenfranchised because they lack the system-wide perspective required for policy-making for a unified system.
- **These** problems were experienced in the case of Higher Still. They were exacerbated by the failure to promote an explicit 'vision' of the aims and strategy of the reform.
- **Many** critics blamed the arrogant and unresponsive style of the leadership of the reform. However a full explanation must take account of the nature of the reform as a flexible unified system, of 'horizontal' as well as 'vertical' lines of conflict within education, and of the political weakness which prevented the leadership from articulating a clear vision.
- **Most** countries' post-compulsory education systems are moving towards greater flexibility and unification. The crisis of educational governance in Scotland in 2000 may foreshadow similar crises elsewhere.

Introduction

In August 2000 many candidates for Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) awards received results that were incomplete or inaccurate, or did not get them on time. These included the first awards for the qualifications introduced by the Higher Still reform of post-16 education. The episode provoked a crisis of confidence in Scottish education and appeared to reveal widespread discontent with Higher Still. For a while the reform's political future seemed to hang in the balance.

But Higher Still was the product of the consensus that emerged during the 'Howie debates' of the early 1990s. It incorporated the main principles of that consensus: that reform was needed; that a tracked system was unacceptable, and that flexibility of course choice and pathways should be retained. The subsequent development programme involved the largest-ever consultation in Scottish education. Implementation was repeatedly re-scheduled to give more time. Even after the crisis, surveys in schools and colleges revealed substantial support for the aims of the reform. So why did the exam results crisis seem to release such a pressure of suppressed resentment and frustration, and have such a political fall-out?

Evidence to the Parliamentary committees set up after the crisis blamed the complex model that was developed (especially the assessment arrangements), the speed with which it was introduced and above all the alleged arrogance and unresponsiveness of the leadership which drove it through. Sam Galbraith was re-shuffled as education minister in October 2001, and soon afterwards the Inspectorate lost its policy-making role. So was the political crisis a reaction against the style of the 'leadership class' of Scottish education (Humes, 1986)? In part, perhaps, but a full explanation must take account of 'horizontal' as well as 'vertical' conflicts within education; of constraints on the power of the leadership; and also of how the nature of the reform itself affected the policy process (McPherson and Raab, 1988; Raffe and Howieson, 1998).

Unification and flexibility

The consultation over the Howie Report revealed general agreement that reform was needed but almost unanimous opposition to a tracked system. By implication, a more unified system was demanded. Unification is the trend for different post-16 tracks either to be brought closer together in a 'linked system' or integrated within a single 'unified system' (Howieson and Raffe, 1999). Higher Still introduces a unified system across at least four fault-lines:

- types of curricula (academic and vocational),
- levels of study (from Access to Advanced Higher),
- institutions (schools and colleges), and
- age groups from 16 upwards.

It does so through a common design framework which prescribes the basic architecture (units, courses and group awards (SGAs)), arrangements for the curriculum, assessment and certification, and common elements such as core skills. The rationale for this approach is discussed elsewhere (eg Howieson and Raffe, 1999).

Box 1: Higher Still: a brief history

1990	The Howie Committee is set up to review curriculum and examinations in upper-secondary school.
1992	The Howie Report proposes a twin-track system from 15 years, to cover FE as well as school education.
1992	In the ensuing consultation the case for change is accepted but tracking is firmly rejected.
1994	Scottish Office announces unified system based on units, courses and group awards at five levels, in academic and vocational subjects, to cover most post-16 education below HE except SVQs.
1994	Development Programme launched.
1995-1997	Consultations over design rules and subject frameworks.
1997	Implementation postponed (for second time) to 1999.
1998-99	Teacher boycott averted by phasing-in within schools.
1999-2004	Implementation, with initial priority for courses to replace SCE Highers. Substantial take-up also at lower (Intermediate 1 and 2) levels.
2000	August: exam results crisis.

Higher Still has flexible entry and exit points and the volume, content and level(s) of study are open. It is thus a flexible model of a unified system, and contrasts with Baccalaureate or programme-based models which are more tightly specified. There are several reasons why Higher Still developed as a flexible unified system:

- submissions to Howie had endorsed the flexibility of the existing system;
- flexible entry points would accommodate low-attaining students without needing separate tracks;
- flexibility suited the prevailing market philosophy and the emerging lifelong learning agenda;
- the Secretary of State rejected earlier proposals for a less flexible model, based on group awards.

Why did the exam results crisis have such a political fall-out?

1. Introducing a unified system is a more conflictual process than other types of reform. Higher Still's unified system straddles the 'fault lines' defined by institutions, curricula, levels of study and age groups. These often emerged as lines of conflict in the development of Higher Still. Issues such as assessment, core skills and SGAs aroused considerable conflict, for example between school and college interests. Most policy reforms can resolve such conflicts either by exempting parts of the system from the common design rules or by allowing the design rules to vary. But a unified system permits neither exemptions nor variations. It is therefore harder to resolve conflicts.

2. **Introducing a flexible unified system is a more conflictual process than introducing other kinds of unified system.** In a Baccalaureate or programme model of a unified system the full award is the main currency. A flexible unified system has very small units of currency (courses and units in the case of Higher Still) and the common design principles apply at this detailed level. This exacerbated the conflicts over Higher Still. Moreover, a system which allows flexible accumulation and transfer of courses and units requires a large volume of internal assessment, since each unit and course is separately certificated, and external assessment on this scale would be impractical.

3. **The leadership failed to expound and promote an explicit vision of Higher Still's unified system and under-sold the scale of the reform.** These conflicts might have been handled had there been a prior consensus around explicit goals and principles of the reform. However the post-Howie consensus was a negative one: Scottish educationists agreed that they did not want a twin-track system. The document which introduced Higher Still made no attempt to expound or promote the principles of a unified system, or to explain why it was the necessary consequence of the desire to reform post-16 education without tracking. It presented Higher Still as a technical fix which addressed specific problems identified by Howie and continued an incremental process of improvement. This low-key approach continued through the development and consultation process.

The under-selling of Higher Still, and the failure to win support for its underlying vision and principles, had serious consequences:

- a basis for conflict resolution - a shared vision of the principles of the reform - was lost;
- staff were not prepared for the scale of the changes;
- the reform and its rationale were not well understood by the public or the media;
- ministers were not prepared for the scale of the changes, or for the need for political leadership.

4. **The under-selling of Higher Still reflected, among other things, the weakness of the leadership.** Higher Still was under-sold in this way because:

- the leadership needed the support of teachers and lecturers, already complaining of 'innovation fatigue', and consequently played down the scale and significance of the changes;
- there was no available prospectus or blueprint for a flexible unified system; an attempt to adapt a Baccalaureate model for Scotland had not borne fruit;
- to have their plans accepted by the Conservative government, the architects of Higher Still needed to obscure the extent to which the reform was based on principles similar to those of the government's critics in England and Wales;
- after the Howie debates 'consultation fatigue', and a reluctance to debate principles, had set in;
- a flexible unified system promises to serve a variety of purposes, and may have made debates about principles and priorities seem unnecessary; only when the debate turned from purposes to the means of achieving them did the conflicts become apparent.

5. **The process of developing a unified system tends to be centralised and top-down, and to disenfranchise participants.** The process of developing a unified system involves developing and applying design rules across the whole system, and therefore requires central co-ordination. We used the term 'democratic centralism' to describe the Higher Still policy process (Raffe and Howieson, 1998). Participants were disenfranchised if they could express the views only of their own sector, subject or level of study. Only people or organisations with a 'system-wide' perspective, on how to reconcile different interests within a national framework, were fully enfranchised in this process.

Consequently the consultation and development were essentially 'top-down' processes. The situation was exacerbated by the reorganisation of the local authorities in 1995-96, which limited their ability to provide a counterbalance to the central leadership.

6. **Implementation decisions exacerbated these problems.** The decision to use a 'cascading' approach to the consultation and to the dissemination of information discouraged a wider understanding of Higher Still and meant that 'chalkface' teachers and lecturers were insufficiently represented.

The implementation sequence, in which courses that replaced SCE Highers were introduced first:

- started by fixing the part of the system that, seen in isolation, least needed fixing;
- did not follow the progression sequence of Higher Still levels and perpetuated the misunderstanding of Higher Still as simply a reform of the Higher;
- obscured its rationale as a means of extending opportunities for lower attainers and promoting parity of esteem for vocational courses.
- meant that any teething troubles would affect the most visible and politically sensitive part of the system: a high-risk strategy.

7. **The exam results crisis was an opportunity to settle old scores.** Higher Still was a 'managed process'; its leaders were determined not to repeat the participative but slow process of the Standard grade development. However it also reflected a trend towards a more 'managerial' leadership style in Scottish education (Fairley and Paterson, 1995;

Humes, 1998), which relied less on teacher professionalism and, at its extreme, aimed to create a dynamic, flexible 'teacher-proof' system.

This leadership style caused resentment, and coincided with a decline in the old consensus which had sustained Scottish education's central leadership (McPherson and Raab, 1988). The exam results crisis was a chance to express that resentment, especially against the Inspectorate whose policies appeared to have contributed towards it. But criticisms of the Inspectorate pre-dated the exam results crisis. Its claim to legitimacy as the champion of Scottish interests against UK political leadership was undermined when the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999. Its dual role as leading policy-maker and as evaluator of its own policies was already under attack, especially from local authorities; Higher Still and the exam results crisis provided the opportunity to drive the attack home.

Similarly, the criticisms of Sam Galbraith reflected general resentment of his managerialist style more than his role in the crisis. Otherwise the target would have been not Galbraith but Henry McLeish, who as minister of lifelong learning was responsible for the SQA's operations.

Concluding issues

- We asked 'what happened to the consensus on Higher Still?' Part of the answer is that it never went away. Recent evidence shows continued wide support for the aims of Higher Still, if not for all of its changes. Given that the process of introducing a flexible unified system is inherently conflict-prone, the continued support for Higher Still is a testimony to the initial consensus.
- In most countries post-16 education is moving towards greater flexibility and unification, if not towards the Scottish model of a flexible unified system. They may face similar crises of governance.
- In Scotland this crisis is concerned with 'horizontal' conflicts between interests within the system, as well as with the power, style and accountability of the leadership.
- Future system-wide policy changes, and the further development of Higher Still, need to start from agreement on explicit principles, purposes and priorities.
- Such agreement may be harder to achieve while education responsibilities remain divided between two departments of the Scottish Executive.

Further reading

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Further information

A longer version of this paper is available as Working Paper 2 of the project on Introducing a Unified System (IUS), www.ed.ac.uk/ces/projects/projectindex.htm

About this study

The IUS project is funded by the ESRC (R000 23 8420) from 2000-2003. It addresses four main issues:

- the kind of 'unified system' emerging from Higher Still;
- the policy process of introducing a unified system;
- the role of schools and colleges in shaping the reform;
- the boundaries of a unified system.

The methods include surveys of schools and colleges and local authorities, analyses of SQA data, case studies and interviews with key informants.

Related CES *Briefings*

No 15: The 'unification' of post-16 education" by Cathy Howieson and David Raffe.

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